

INTRODUCTION

We’re on an exciting verse by verse study of the book of 2 Corinthians I’m calling, “Hope for Cracked Pots.” Today we’re going to answer a very important question: “How should we treat someone who messed up?”

One of the most touching moments in NBA history took place in a 2003 playoff game between the Portland Trailblazers and the Dallas Mavericks. Actually, it happened before the game began.

Natalie Gilbert was a 13 year old 8th grader who had won the chance to sing the national anthem a capella before the game. Even though she had been in bed all day with a flu, she was determined to do her best. She was obviously nervous, and a few lines into the song, Natalie forgot the words. She stood there embarrassed in the spotlight in front the crowd and a national television audience. It had to be the most agonizing moment in Natalie’s young life - and everyone there was embarrassed for her as well. But after only a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Maurice Cheeks, the Trailblazers head coach walked to Natalie’s side, put his arm around her and helped her with the words. They started singing together, and soon the entire crowd was singing the national anthem. His act of helping Natalie brought the entire crowd into the song. There was thunderous cheering when they all reached the words, “o’re the land of the free and the home of the brave!”

Natalie messed up, but fortunately there was someone there to help her recover, and she finished strong. Wouldn’t it be great if Christians could come along side our brothers and sisters who have messed up and help them recover spiritually so they can finish strong?

Everybody messes up, even Christians. But we don’t have a very good reputation for how we treat them. Someone has said that “the Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded.” When a Christian sins, and it becomes public knowledge, we often refer to them as “fallen.” They haven’t fallen from salvation, they’ve fallen down in their walk with God. But instead of extending a hand to help them up, many Christians react by kicking them when they’re down.

We find some strong words in 2 Corinthians on how we should treat a Christian who has messed up. We’ll begin reading in 2 Corinthians - 2:5 -11: “If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent - not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven - if there was anything to forgive - I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

Whenever you study the Bible you should always ask at least three questions: Question #1: What do the words mean to the people addressed at the time they were written? Question #2: What are the principles revealed in this passage that apply to all Christians everywhere? And Question #3: How do these words and biblical principles apply to ME today? As it relates to this passage of

scripture, we’re going to answer all three questions in that order.

1. THE ISSUE: SOMEONE SINNED AND WAS CONFRONTED BY THE GROUP

Let’s review the vs 6: “he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you... The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.” There was a man in the church at Corinth who had committed some sin that had grieved Paul, and the entire church. We don’t know who he was or what he had done. Some suggest that this is the man Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 5 who was guilty of sexual immorality. But most Bible scholars agree that this is referring to another incident. Perhaps it was referring to a man who had publicly opposed the Apostle Paul and had created division and discord in the church. We don’t know for sure, and that’s good. Because if we knew the specific sin, we might think that these principles apply only to that particular sin, but since we don’t know, these principles apply to all similar situations.

This man had been confronted by the larger group because Paul mentions “the punishment inflicted on him by the majority.” The word majority might mean that there was even some kind of a vote on the issue.

Based upon what Jesus taught in Matthew 18, there are times when issues like this should be addressed by the larger group. Jesus taught that there are three steps that should be followed in the case of the sin of a brother or sister. First, the offended person should approach the guilty person one-on-one. If the guilty believer doesn’t respond to that the offended person should take one or two others to request that the guilty person repent and settle the issue. But Jesus said that if the guilty person still doesn’t respond positively that the issue should be brought before the church. At this point, the group addresses the sin and asks the guilty person to repent - if he still doesn’t listen, the Jesus said we are to treat him as a pagan or a tax collector. That just means you treat them as if they’re not a believer. And truthfully, if a person doesn’t respond after these three steps, there’s a good chance they aren’t really a Christian at all.

You may be wondering if we still follow that procedure today, and the answer is, “yes.” I know of many issues that have been settled at step one, but I’ve been involved in several issues where I am brought in at step two, and thankfully, the issue was resolved at that point. With a church of 13,000 members it is impractical to bring issues like this to the entire congregation. But there have been times when we’ve had to address certain issues at the group level of our Deacon Body, or a Sunday Morning Bible Study group, or our staff. Our church is really comprised of many smaller groups, each of which functions like a church within a church. I’ll never reveal any of the specific issues that have been addressed on the group level, but just let me say that we are committed to obeying ALL the Word of God, and the steps that Jesus outlined work today as well as they did 2,000 years ago.

So what was the punishment that was imposed by the group? We don’t know. It might have been a public warning for him to repent. Or it might have been a public rebuke or censure, but as we’ll see in the next point, whatever they did worked, and the man repented.

2. THE RESULT: THE GUILTY PERSON WAS SORRY AND REPENTED

In Corinth, the guilty person was lovingly confronted by the group and he repented. We see this from vs 7: “you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” The key phrase is “excessive sorrow.” The man at fault had expressed sorrow over his actions, and Paul said that it was time to forgive him so that he wouldn’t experience an overload of sorrow.

There is a direct correlation between sorrow and repentance. In our culture we have worn out the phrase, “I’m sorry.” We use it for everything from, “I’m sorry, but we’re out of peanuts,” to “I’m sorry I bumped into you.” But the words “I’m sorry” originally meant, “I’m experiencing sorrow over what I did.” In Corinthians 7, Paul writes about sorrow and repentance. “I am happy not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance...godly sorrow brings repentance.” (2 Corinthians 7:9) So the Bible teaches that godly sorrow produces repentance. There is a kind of worldly sorrow that doesn’t lead to repentance. When someone says, “I’m sorry” they might be saying, “I’m sorry I got caught.” Or if they say, “I’m sorry” but they don’t plan on changing their behavior, that isn’t Godly sorrow. Godly sorrow always produces repentance. When a person truly repents, their heart is broken over their sin.

In commenting on this passage, Ray Stedman wrote: “This man had repented. He had admitted that what he did was wrong; and that is what repentance is. The sign that you really see that what you did was wrong is that you begin to see the hurt that you have caused by it; and it creates a sense of sorrow that you have been the instrument by which many have been damaged in their faith or in their feelings. Therefore, the mark of true repentance is sorrow.”

3. THE GOAL: WE SHOULD SEEK TO RESTORE THOSE WHO HAVE REPENTED

Here’s the answer to the question about how we should treat people who messed up. The paraphrase of verse 7 says, “Now is the time to forgive this man and help him back on his feet. If all you do is pour on the guilt, you could very well drown him in it. My counsel now is to pour on the love.” (The Message) When a brother or sister has sinned, then sorrowed, and repented, our only goal should be to restore them. That means we restore them to fellowship and usefulness in the church. Sadly, it seems that more churches practice rejection rather than restoration. But the Bible clearly teaches the beautiful process of restoration. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:1-2) Notice that the Bible teaches that restoration should be gentle and not painful. We shouldn’t demand that the person who repents grovel and squirm like a worm in hot ashes until we’ve collected our pound of flesh. Do you know that the “temptation” is that we should avoid when we’re restoring someone? Simple. It’s the temptation to believe that we’re BETTER than the person we’re restoring! “Hey, I’m so spiritual. I haven’t done what you’ve done, so (blow on fingernails and polish them) yeah, maybe I’ll think about restoring you.” In restoring others we should remember the adage, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” According to this scripture there are two things involved in restoration

(1) RESTORATION MEANS: Forgive them because you have been forgiven

Paul used the word “forgive” six times in these few verses. Some people say that forgiveness is a

choice, but as a follower of Jesus, we really don't have a choice in the matter. Forgiveness is a command. You might be tempted to think or say, "that person doesn't deserve forgiveness." By its very nature, forgiveness is never deserved—it is always a gift of grace. The reason we forgive others is because Jesus has forgiven us - even when we didn't deserve it. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind and tenderhearted toward one another, forgiving one another even as God for Christ sake has forgiven you."

When you forgive someone you are basically making three promises to them. (1) To the person who repents you say, "I promise that I won't allow our relationship to be governed any longer because of what you did. I will treat you as if it never happened." (2) You're also saying, "I promise that I won't pass this information along to anyone else." This applies when the issue is between two people. But in the case of the man in Corinth, whose sin was known by the group, it means, "We promise that we won't bring this issue up again or talk about it outside the circle of our group." (3) The third promise is, "I promise myself that I will repeat the act of forgiveness every time this issue resurfaces in my memory." How many times have you heard, "Well, I'll forgive you but I won't forget it." Let me translate that: "I won't forgive you." Biologically, you can't forget things that happen to you except by brain damage or senility. But when you forgive someone you're promising yourself that you won't allow this issue to make you bitter. The memory of that sin might circle around your brain occasionally, but you can't let it land. Billy Graham says, "You can't keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." When you've forgiven someone and the memory of their sin flutters by your brain just say, "I deliberately remember choosing to forgive that."

(2) RESTORATION MEANS: Love them because you have been loved

In Galatians 6:2 we see that restoration involves carrying someone's burden. When you do that you fulfill the law of Christ. There are hundreds of laws in the Old Testament but Jesus only gave one law, and it was the law of love. He said that all the law and prophets of the Old Testament can be condensed into this: "Love God with all your heart; and love your neighbor as yourself."

Everybody needs to be loved, but when someone has failed, they really need to hear that they are loved. That's why Paul says to "reaffirm your love" for the one who has failed. You may be thinking, "They don't deserve to be loved." Well, neither do we, but God loves us while we are still sinners - and none of us deserve His love. First John 4:19 is a great verse with just seven elegant words, "We love because He first loved us."

We need to practice restoration because there may be a time when we will need it ourselves. We all make mistakes. Tom Osborne, the long time coach of the Nebraska Cornhuskers, loves to tell a funny story about mistakes in a football game. The Cornhuskers were playing in the final game of the season and they needed a win to secure the conference championship. With two minutes left in the game Nebraska was trailing by 6 points and they got the ball on their own twenty yard line. Coach Osborne's play calling hadn't worked that day, so he told his quarterback to run only two plays - dive 7 to the left and then dive 8 to the right. They ran 7 and 8 all the way down the field, and ended up inside the 4 yard line, fourth down and goal to go, and time was running out. The opposing team had figured out what Nebraska was doing so they were stacking their

linebackers in those holes. Time was ticking down, and Coach Osborne was searching for a new play to call, but he didn't signal it in time. So, the QB just called a play on his own - 16 bootleg pass. The QB rolled to the right and tossed a pass for a touchdown and the win as time expired. After the game, Coach Osborne asked his QB why he called 16 bootleg pass. The QB said, "Coach, you didn't get the play in for me so I figured since we'd been running 7 and 8, I just added those two numbers. 7 and 8 is 16, so I ran 16 bootleg." Coach Osborne said, "Son, you may be a college student, but you aren't very smart. 7 plus 8 is 15, not 16!" The QB thought for a moment and said, "Gee, I guess if I was as smart as you I guess we wouldn't have won!" You can make mistakes and still win. That's why we need to practice restoration.

(4) THE IMPACT: RESTORATION DISRUPTS SATAN'S PLANS

As you read this passage, all of a sudden you come to an unexpected reference to Satan. What does the devil have to do with restoration? Nothing - in fact he hates it! Look again at verse 11, "I'm joining in with your forgiveness, as Christ is with us, guiding us. After all, we don't want to unwittingly give Satan an opening for yet more mischief—we're not oblivious to his sly ways!" (*The Message*)

The word for the devil's "schemes" or "sly ways" is the word *methodia*, for which we get our word "method." I guess that proves that the devil is a Methodist! No, but it does mean that Satan has certain schemes or methods he uses and when we KNOW his methods we can resist him. Satan's two main methods are (1) Divide and conquer and (2) Tell lies. He attacked Eve in the Garden of Eden when she was alone, and he fed her a lie, "if you eat this fruit you will be like God." The devil isn't very innovative, he still uses the same methods he used in Genesis 3. The devil tries to spread lies in order to create division and discord. Satan wants to divide every family, every church, and every friendship. He loves to see people angry at each other, and the angrier we become, the more he likes it. That's why the Bible says, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." (Ephesians 4:26-27) When you stay angry at a brother or sister in Christ, that animosity gives Satan access to your mind. If you give Satan an inch of foothold in your mind, he will poison your personality, soil your soul, and sour your spirit. That's why Satan hates for Christians to resolve their differences. When we considering restoring someone, Satan hisses into our ear, "He/she doesn't DESERVE to be forgiven. After what he/she did, don't you DARE accept them again!" When you think that, you need to say, "Satan, you are a dirty, rotten liar. Get behind me." And whenever we gently restore a Christian who has messed up, Satan says, "Curses, foiled again!" While at the same time, you can hear the applause of the nail scarred hands in heaven.

CONCLUSION

I remember hearing the great preacher, Stephen Olford, once tell the story about a man named "DC." In the late 1800's, there was a teenager in a village in Scotland who was constantly committing crimes. He was caught stealing livestock, and even set fire to a farmer's house and barn. He was arrested and punished, but he continued to create havoc in the village. Finally the leaders of the village took drastic measures. They restrained the young man and took a hot brand and burned the letters "DC" on his face under his left eye. People in that part of Scotland knew that the letters meant, "Dangerous Criminal." His brand warned everyone who saw him that he

couldn't be trusted.

After several years of more crime, DC stole enough money to catch a ship to America. While in Chicago he heard the preaching of D.L. Moody and was gloriously converted to Christ, and started living for God. Whenever anyone asked him about the brand “DC” he wouldn't tell them about his past, so nobody knew what “DC” stood for. He never married, and devoted his life to his work as a shoe repairman and as a Bible teacher of teenagers in his church. DC spent over 50 years faithfully serving the Lord. When he died, there were hundreds of young people who had been taught by DC attending his funeral. The pastor said, “Most of us have wondered about the mark on DC's face, and we never knew what it stood for. After knowing him for all these years, I finally know what DC stands for: Disciple of Christ.” What a testimony! God can change a dangerous criminal into a disciple of Christ. If God can restore a man like DC, we should be willing to restore brothers and sisters who have messed up as well.

Charles Swindoll writes about a young man who was restored. “A young man once described going astray from God like he was at sea in deep water, deep trouble, and all his friends were on the shoreline hurling biblical accusations at him about justice, penalty and wrong... ‘but there was one Christian brother who actually swam out to get me and would not let me go. I fought him, but he pushed aside my fighting, grasped me, put a life jacket around me, and took me to shore. By the grace of God, he was the reason I was restored. He would not let me go.’” Does anyone come to your mind who messed up and instead of forgiveness they were castigated and rejected by the group? You can't rescue them from the shore. If God brings someone to your mind, why don't you jump in and rescue them with restoration?

Maybe you're here today and you need restoration. You're listening to me, but you've messed up. You were sorry and repented, and yet instead of forgiveness and restoration you received alienation and rejection. The hand that your group offered was a fist, not an open hand of love. You still love Jesus as much as ever, it's just that God's children have failed to restore you. Remember, the name of this series is “Hope for Cracked Pots.” All of us have some cracks, but God can still restore us to usefulness. You may feel that you're on the sidelines, but God can put you back in the game. God wants to restore you.

Do you need restoration today? In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I declare that you are forgiven and healed. This church is far from perfect, but there are people here who are willing to accept you and love you—warts and all. So, right now, why don't you let the Spirit of God heal you and allow the people of God love you? May God allow our church to be a haven for restoring cracked pots, and may we become known as a fellowship of restoration! Amen.

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For the Joy...
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